

# Those Wicked Dead White Men: Using “Countertexts” in Architectural History Courses to Help Students Meet the Goals of General Education

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Educational constructs today demand that architectural history courses no longer be mere chronological expositions of styles, architects, and their masterpieces. As studio courses move to expropriate tools of historical inquiry, history courses – at risk of losing their identity – must reassert their intrinsically liberalizing disposition within a professionally circumscribed curriculum. This pedagogical critique converts “service” course into “general education” experience. Devised to bolster cultural and educational breadth, history courses so reconceived would challenge the canon of “dead white men” through the employment of those “countertexts” that can cultivate a more comprehensive appreciation of alternative worldviews while sharpening students’ critical thinking skills.

*Water, water, everywhere,  
And all the boards did shrink;  
Water, water, everywhere,  
Nor any drop to drink.*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge  
*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

## Troubles Beset Architectural History

Abu al-Muhajir Dinar, the last conquering commander of Islamic armies to have swept across the North African littoral in the seventh and eighth centuries, arrived at the shores of the Atlantic, dipped his toe into its vast stretches of water, and declared that there was nothing left to conquer. He had reached the limits of what was conceivable to him. The unconquerable ocean was, from his vantage point, a barrier. It delimited his world and tethered his cosmopolitan reach. This story, recounted twice by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle in their book *Timbuktu: The Sahara's Fabled City of Gold*, stands as a fitting metaphor for the current disposition of architectural

history courses, especially those introductory surveys that “serve” professional architecture programs and thus hardly ever sail out onto the choppy worldwide seas of general cultural awareness and knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

For too long now architectural history courses and their expositors have drawn sharp boundaries around content. Slow to change, history courses have partitioned a realm of inquiry with neatly defined territories that only just recently have begun to encroach upon the unfamiliar, littoral edges of other traditions tangential to Western building customs.<sup>3</sup>

Other constraints on teaching history have been driven by the pressures exerted from studio-oriented curricula that regard history to be that perfect niche within which matters of precedent are best accommodated.

More fundamentally, historians’ acquiescence to these historical and conventional limitations on the instruction of history have helped to magnify the pervasive perception that the entire discipline of professional building arts is such a distinct field of study unto itself in the academy that it is justifiably cloistered from more comprehensive and liberalizing educational objectives. The “service” nature of history has obscured its potentially much more meaningful educational role by over-emphasizing its skill at being a mere depository of historical minutiae. Unfortunately, this much-too-narrowly conceived appropriation of history’s role has an inexorability to it that dismisses the discipline’s inherent ability to sharpen students’ critical thinking skills.

## Daring to Venture to Timbuktu

Rather than look inward and become subservient to architecture curricula, history courses and their chroniclers need to look outward from other vantage points that present differently enriching perspectives to students of architecture in order to connect them to new panoramas of their world. In short, architectural history courses need to become unabashedly general (liberal) education courses within professional architecture curricula.

The brilliance of the de Villiers and Hirtle book is that, in a single evocative passage employing water as an analog for obstructions to further conquest and expanded knowledge, it nevertheless alerts us to those other vibrant worlds that co-existed alongside Western civilization with all its admirable accomplishments. While those other “exotic” worlds were once regarded as robust expressions of the

human will but only up to a certain point of confrontation with an irresistible force, they nevertheless are now proving more and more to have equaled and even outshone what we have routinely extolled about Western civilization. In *Timbuktu*, the authors demonstrate that the city had been a preeminent cultural epicenter of Islamic learning in the same manner and at about the same time that Trecento Italy had begun to nurture a rebirth of learning.<sup>4</sup> Awareness of the importance of Timbuktu in the Islamic world stands as an instructive countertext to our canonical texts about the rise of a presumptively singular Renaissance in Europe. Timbuktu is not some fabled city. Its culture and the buildings that housed its culture of learning demand our attention, especially in a post-9/11 world.

Admittedly, *Timbuktu* is not an easy read. It requires hard mental labor to wade through a deluge of historical facts in order to access its larger message – not the sort of text one would want to impose on students enrolled in introductory courses. Nevertheless, the purveyors of those history courses should not merely dip a toe into that unfathomable ocean and then turn away. They should take the plunge, explore its vast reaches, and then bring back their discoveries and fresh insights to their students in order to expand and redirect those students' parochial vistas of world culture.<sup>5</sup> With this perspective, the Italian Renaissance becomes one of any number of revivals of learning worldwide. In fact, it pales somewhat in comparison to the vigor of the scholars and the architects associated with the mosques and universities in Timbuktu.

### **Dealing with Dead White Men**

Scholarly dissertations, like *Timbuktu*, are educationally transformative in that they exorcise old and persistent Eurocentric ghosts. The wholesale condemnation of Eurocentric cultural studies is best polemicized in the hackneyed expression “dead white men” – an epithet applied pejoratively to both the men (think “Columbus”) who are supposed to have precipitated the world's watershed events and the historians (think “Gibbon”) who later gave disproportionate preeminence to those high water mark events in the global narratives they chronicled.

Now, imagine an even more heightened intellectual richness produced by the introduction into an architectural history course of yet another maritime-themed narrative that sits in counterpoise to the historic journey's ending of Abu al-Muhajir Dinar. The end of the road for Romulus

Augustulus, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, was Campania. (His name alludes to both the origins of the Romans and the birth of their later imperial system of government.) After having been deposed by a “barbarian” and exiled from Ravenna in 476 CE to live in a villa on the Bay of Naples, the teenage Romulus Augustulus passed his last days in relative royal comfort, always visually cognizant of the sea.

In his book *Are We Rome?*, Cullen Murphy constructs an alternative, melancholic evocation of the ending of majesty with a countertext of serenity posited as a complement to the musty chronicles of cataclysmic eruptions, barbarous murders, and other depravities that have long been reputed to have precipitated the fall of the Roman Empire:

But the breeze off the bay is fresh and constant. Even without vendors selling *granita al limone* it would have been a congenial spot in which to endure your exile, especially on 6,000 *soldi* a year and with Vesuvius quiet. For many Roman emperors, the end had been far less kind, and the breeze far more fleeting, and felt only on the back of the neck.<sup>6</sup>

If ancient accounts are more accurate than apocryphal, then Romulus Augustulus likely spent his idle hours on that headland gazing at the waters of the Mediterranean. The boy emperor never had constructed a single piece of architecture; but did he sit in his seaside villa contemplating the course of the great empire he had lost? Did it dawn on him that the edifying strength of that empire had been founded on and around navigable waterways? Rome was, after all, the only historic entity to control the entire Mediterranean coastline. From the perspective of Augustulus, water then would have been regarded not as a barrier to conquest or to the acquisition of knowledge. To the contrary, Murphy's musings resonate all the more profoundly because, when set against de Villiers and Hirtle's anecdote, they are the complement to Abu al-Muhajir Dinar's perception of water as an inscrutable and insurmountable natural force. On the other hand, Abu al-Muhajir Dinar's had the Sahara as his sea – an ocean of sand that his tribes had learned to navigate, guided by stars like a ship's pilot, from the backs of “ships of the desert” – camels. For the Romans, deserts and mountains were the more formidable barriers; it was the mighty sea that fortified a united “Romanized” citizenry.

Together these two counterbalancing tales, both set against the backdrop of water, conspire to plot a new course for the purveyors of history courses. They speak tellingly, through the metaphor of water seen alternately as impossibility or potentiality, of the diverse cultural modalities that inherently govern our worldviews.<sup>7</sup> That is, so often the basic framework upon which we hang the facts of architectural history is constructed out of a kit of parts that presumes the only historic events of any real relevance are those based on *terra firma* because that is where the foundations of structures must necessarily come to rest – on solid ground.

### **Why Not Study the Greeks?**

Michael Shenefelt had taken just exactly that mariner's stance when he wrote "Why Study the Greeks? Check the Map." The various Greek tribes, Shenefelt observed, were divided by mountains and islands, "yet the exceptional smoothness of the Mediterranean sea connected them by an easy means of transportation."<sup>8</sup>

Now, this variation of a maritime-based precept, which Shenefelt effectively employed to bolster traditional Eurocentric curricular biases, argues that "in most historical periods, land transport was largely irrelevant."<sup>9</sup> Shenefelt effectively wielded a seafaring proposition to explain why the ancient Greeks dominated their world and why they continue to deserve to predominate in the "present state of the college curriculum."<sup>10</sup> That curriculum, for all the talk about diversity and multiculturalism, has been and still largely exists as a Eurocentric curriculum. Shenefelt's freshly conceived importance of the free exercise of seafaring skills was a new take on an old proposition – that transportation technologies were crucial mechanisms for cultural dissemination and exchange. It seemingly defended and reinforced the "Dead White Men" models of higher education. In truth, Shenefelt charted two new courses for higher education: first, the intellectual necessity for reversing one's perspective of standard interpretations and, second, the pedagogical mechanisms by which to introduce those reversed perspectives.

### **Plotting the First New Course**

Shenefelt's article establishes a precedent for alternative, non-canonical interpretations of history – in essence, countertexts. His work on the ancient Greeks' maritime prowess anticipated a uniquely maritime history of the Greeks authored by John R. Hale. In *Lords of the Sea*,

Hale argues that it was not their artistry or their great philosophical belief systems that established their cultural superiority. It was their mastery of the sea. In Hale's view, the Parthenon, although elevated on the Acropolis, stood in the shadows of the greater (but now little referenced) naval arsenal of Philo. "Philo himself ... felt so proud of his naval arsenal that he wrote a book about it. No such sign of respect or public interest had been accorded the more prestigious Parthenon on the Acropolis."<sup>11</sup> The arsenal, properly called the Skeuothekē, was designed in the Doric style like the Parthenon, but it far surpassed it or any other temple in Greece in size. Ought not it also be covered in a history course as a complement to – not necessarily a substitute for – the more aesthetically "prestigious" Parthenon? After all, the arsenal stood at the true epicenter of Athenian power – Athens's port at Piraeus.

When Hale does first focus our attention on the Parthenon, it is from a vantage point that is disconcertingly detached from our usual conception of the temple's importance:

The glories of the Acropolis dominate our modern view of Athens. Ancient Athenians saw their city differently. In terms of civic pride, the temples of the gods were eclipsed by the vast complex of installations for the navy. ... Only one contemporary literary reference to the Parthenon has survived to our time, in fragments of an anonymous comedy. Even here the Parthenon takes second place to [the mention of] nautical monuments.<sup>12</sup>

What if a history course were to devote as much time to the lively, daily functioning of Philo's Arsenal as to the shell of the Parthenon? Would not our perception of the ancient Greek culture and their traditional touchstone of matchless poise and grandeur be tempered by the admiration the Greeks themselves paid to the Skeuothekē? There are authentic liberalizing advantages to looking at the Parthenon sometimes but distantly within a panoramic vista from Zea Harbor at Piraeus rather than from the framing portal of the Propylaea.<sup>13</sup>

### **Water, Water, Everywhere**

In *The Middle Sea: A History of the Mediterranean*, John Julius Norwich affirms that the waters of the Mediterranean were the principle catalytic agent of historical events in ancient times – not cultural barrier but cross-cultural

facilitator as the region's principal means of communication. He is jubilant as he extols the power of the sea in the opening line of his text: "The Mediterranean is a miracle. Seeing it on the map for the millionth time, we tend to take it for granted." He waxes lyrical about its providential existence when he describes it as "a body of water that might have been deliberately designed ... ." Although the "Middle Sea" is almost totally encircled by land, "it is saved from stagnation by ... those ancient Pillars of Hercules which protect it from the worst of Atlantic storms and keep its waters fresh ... . It links three of the world's six continents." During the infancy of navigation, "it was possible to sail from port to port without ever losing sight of land ... ."14 Indeed, in its larger thesis as well as in its particular rhetorical flourishes, Norwich's introduction is perfectly emblematic of countertextual reformulations of history – that is, mitigating the effects of stagnant viewpoints, seeing things afresh, venturing into new territories, but never losing sight of traditional landmarks.15

### **Barbarians at the Gate**

Murphy's previously referenced book *Are We Rome?* is quite adept, too, at guiding readers to vantage points that cut new channels by which to explore the grandest of all time-tested and time-honored intellectual constructs – empire. Murphy sets the stage for a new viewing platform of the ancient imperial Romans when he writes:

Think less about threats from unwelcome barbarians, and more about the healthy functioning of a multi-ethnic society. Think less about the ability of a superpower to influence everything on earth, and more about how everything on earth affects a superpower.16

What an entirely different perspective – to see the Roman Empire more as the pawn than as the provocateur!17

As Murphy recasts Rome in a reactionary rather than a proactive role, he quite clearly engages in the practice of juxtaposing text to countertext – to paraphrase, "think less virulent xenophobia, think more healthy multiculturalism." The text in this case is, of course, Edward Gibbon's classic 18th-century, literary behemoth *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The contrast between Murphy's anecdotal evocations versus Gibbon's ponderous judgments of failure could not be more sharply drawn than when Murphy quotes Gibbon directly: "... the causes of destruction multiplied

with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight."18 Murphy counters with an intellectually more buoyant analysis of the legendary assaults on Rome's inviolate borders and institutionalized cultural homogeneity:

... Hadrian's Wall has the appearance of something built to repel barbarian hordes. ... but it was ... meant to be penetrated. ... [T]he milecastles had fortified gateways expressly to make the wall permeable – to regulate traffic cross-border traffic rather than to prevent it. ... [T]hose *Brittunculi* [or border towns populated with both Roman settlers and indigenous Britons] – grew up symbiotically outside the military installations.19

As an adage, "barbarians at the (proverbial) gate" takes on an entirely different tone depending on which side of the wall one stands – Gibbon's or Murphy's. The two alternative interpretations do not cancel each other out; they mutually enrich. Each text is dependent on its countertext to claim relevancy and validity.20

Thus, the fresh perspectives of Shenefelt's scholarship – as well as those of Hale and Norwich and Murphy, interpreters all of ancient Greek and Roman domination – have unburdened other intellectual explorers – us – from the weight of old authoritative texts by positing points of view that create, in essence, countertexts or antidotes to the stultifying humors of tomes from bygone days.

### **Plotting the Second New Course**

A second course charted by Shenefelt's piquant article issues forth from his advice on the manner for handling all these additional countertexts in history courses already overflowing with content. Shenefelt advises: "No new course is required to do this. All it takes is a little more attention . . . [a]nd one way to make the central point [supported by observable parallels in other cultures] is simply to list them."21 Whereupon Shenefelt dutifully lists a myriad of other instances of seafaring's impact on both the dissemination of cultural watersheds and the germination of intellectual high water marks.

While his "listing" methodology is subject to those same critiques of superficiality that historians currently confront

from design studio teaching colleagues who regard history lectures to be nothing more than inventories of precedent studies, Shenefelt nevertheless makes it a point not to exclude non-Western examples from his list, thereby neatly running the gauntlet between “dead white men” on one side and under-represented populations on the other side. His qualified allegiance to the principles of diversity is a genuine effort to balance Eurocentric texts with multicultural countertexts. As a result, the picture that Shenefelt draws possesses a universality to it notwithstanding his primary motivation to employ such a list as proof that his larger thesis championing Western hegemony is entirely valid. Shenefelt’s approach is a little wicked in motivation but not wholly irredeemable in intent.<sup>22</sup>

### **General Education Criteria**

General education – “the public face of a liberal education” – strives to create an astute citizenry that is willing to absorb and capable of filtering cross-cultural currents and global contacts throughout their lives.<sup>23</sup> General education was devised, in part, to counter a long-lived Eurocentrism in the American academy, not to “... [instill] confidence in students by flattering the presumption that the world they are familiar with is the only one that matters.”<sup>24</sup> As the flagship of American educational reform, Harvard University recently reaffirmed general education as its preferred educational blueprint by which, “... without concern for topical relevance or vocational utility,” students are made “more reflective ... , more self-conscious and critical ... , more creative ... , [and] more perceptive of the world around them, ... in an environment free from most of the constraints on time and energy that operate in the rest of life.”<sup>25</sup>

As part of the academy, architecture curricula are (thankfully) required to accommodate liberalizing experiences as stipulated by various national accrediting agencies. For instance, in espousing the importance of breadth as well as depth of study, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools defines general education as “[u]nderstanding and appreciating diverse cultures, mastering multiple modes of inquiry, effectively analyzing and communicating information, and recognizing the importance of creativity and values to the human spirit ... .”<sup>26</sup>

The National Architectural Accrediting Board validates the necessity for architecture students to be broadly and

liberally educated as well. It has recently modified its conditions for accreditation so that the artifice within the performance criteria that previously divided an understanding of “traditions” (not “histories” – one should note) into separate Western versus non-Western categories was erased in favor of a rubric that now blends the perspectives of “parallel and divergent canons and traditions” all into a single great “historical traditions and global culture” criterion.<sup>27</sup>

### **Architectural History as “Gen Ed”**

Much of the current pedagogical discourse on the appropriate role of history classes often pulls professional historians in oppositional directions – history or theory, sovereign discipline or service course, integral contributor to the curriculum or intellectual construct subsumed by the *atelier*. Historians need not always succumb to the particularized demands and domineering weight given over to design studio education. There is another option.

History courses can rightly be that place where architecture students connect themselves and their chosen field to the world at large – past and present, Western and non-Western, canonical and dissident, conventional and unorthodox. In accord with new educational paradigms and national accreditation standards, history courses no longer need be mere chronological expositions of styles, architects, and their masterpieces. They can be that one most apropos place within the curriculum where, to paraphrase English professor Wayne Booth, design students learn how to interrogate the tyranny of their own cultural canon.<sup>28</sup>

### **Countertexts**

Interrogation of the canon, or critical thinking exercises, must become part and parcel of this new pedagogical model for architectural history class reconceived as general education course; and, to be successful, those exercises should be culturally broad-based and would doubtlessly include what has herein been termed “countertexts.” The word “countertext” was coined to refer to those other accounts of the world that complement – not banish – existing texts in order to render a more comprehensive picture of diverse cultural streams. “Countertext” should not be interpreted to connote a counter argument or an antithetical discourse that is intended to oppose and ultimately demolish the more predominant, governing thesis. A countertext is meant to be constructive in building

oceanic-scaled cultural awareness, not deconstructivist in terms of generating great upwelling currents that replace authoritative centers with deeply submerged marginal trends or tribal traditions.

The term “countertext” apparently originated in philological studies of the Bible. The clearest definition of its intent and use can be found in the essay “Methods in Old Testament Study” by David J. Clines. “[T]here is a type of knowledge,” he opines, “that can be very valuable even though it may not exist. Every text has a countertext – something that could have been articulated but was not.”<sup>29</sup> Once the countertext is articulated “the substantiality, singularity, and inevitability of the text can be challenged through the deliberate act of redirecting our attention to something else that differently enriches and deepens our understanding of the text.”<sup>30</sup>

One question that surfaces here is how the newly realized countertext acquires its own legitimacy, for it must be able to withstand the imperative of demonstrable historical evidence on its own. In short, how does the countertext, which complements the canon, become canonical itself? One very good example can be found in the discipline of Biblical studies.

The only thing that official Christian dogma teaches about the childhood of Jesus Christ appears in the Gospel of Mark, 2:46:

And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of doctors, *both* [emphasis added] hearing them, and asking them questions.

Yet apocryphal texts give us another glimpse of a mischievous boy who had yet to learn how to use his divine powers. In the Gospel of the Infancy of Christ, 19:16-21, we read:

But when the Lord Jesus clapped his hands over the [clay] sparrows he had made, they fled away chirping. At length the son of Hanani coming to the fish-pool of Jesus to destroy it, the water vanished away, and the Lord Jesus said to him, In like manner as this water has vanished, so shall thy life vanish; and presently the boy died.

This “gospel” is not included in Christian canon for all-too-obvious reasons. Nonetheless, it challenges the “substantiality, singularity, and inevitability” of the canonical text. Why and how then might we want to validate the apocryphal narrative, unnerving though it may be, as a genuine countertext that complements the duly sanctioned canonical writings? The authenticity we seek comes from this passage:

I have come to you, with a sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by God’s leave.

This verse is found in the Qur’an (Sūra 3:49), obviously the canonical text of Islam.

The same clay birds crafted by Jesus in suppressed Christian writings emerge as part of the fundamental tenets of Islam. Next to Mohammed, there is no more important prophet of Islam than Christ. When the close connection between Christianity and Islam – one of many that can be referenced – is revealed to students prior to a discussion of Islamic architecture, the students will tend to view Islam, Muslims, and their cultural artifacts in a different light than that which the singularity of a Christian viewpoint derived from the Bible would have dictated. The countertext from the Qur’an, substantiated as an authentic countervailing viewpoint through its canonical acceptance by one-fifth of the world’s population, enriches the understanding of other worldviews amongst our American (mostly Christian) students. They are allowed through a countertext to plumb the depths of a religion intimately linked to their own. They are granted permission to penetrate one of those walls that has customarily – because of ignorance and prejudice – separated two great cultures born of the same ancient, venerable religious tradition.

### **The Globe Is Not Just a Theater**

There are teachable moments, too, when the countertext follows directly on the heels of the text in the same passage of a lone manuscript penned in one moment in time by a single author.

*Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red.*<sup>31</sup>

Those familiar lines epitomize the genius that was William Shakespeare. They spotlight his fullest mastery of the English language. *Macbeth* became the coda for six centuries of English language development. Shakespearean English, fully distilled from its Latin, French, and Anglo-Saxon roots, flourished, in large part, because the talented playwright coined so many new words himself. In *Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language*, Robert McCrum writes:

[Macbeth's] famous speech is the work of a writer with an eye for an audience that is simultaneously after both high and low culture. Having flattered the classically educated men of substance sitting at the side of the stage [of the Globe Theater], or in the two-penny seats, with a scintillating Latinate phrase ('The multitudinous seas incarnadine'), Shakespeare repeats it in good, plain old English ('Making the green one red') for the benefit of the groundlings crammed into the pit.<sup>32</sup>

Because the Globe Theater was a vessel filled to overflowing with the bard's playful use of text-and-countertext, a now-respectable but once-aberrant language still preserves glimpses running backward in time into the wellsprings of two divergent but purer linguistic traditions that had fully merged by Shakespeare's day to form modern English. Within English today, we still sense the faint burbling of distinctly different streams of cultural expression – one polished and one unvarnished – that act to commemorate ancient peoples whom we have never heard speak ourselves.

### **Countertexts Before History**

The only men more dead than “dead white men” are prehistoric humankind because, by definition, they left no written language behind. Yet they, too, used countertexts to comprehend the entirety of the world as they knew it.

Standard textbooks conjecture about images of animals painted haphazardly on the walls of Paleolithic caves as having been employed as talismans individually in superstitious rituals to insure success in the hunt; but a pointed discussion of the alternative Leroi-Gourhan Theory adds an enriching interpretation that challenges old perceptions. Exhaustively scrutinized in Amir D. Aczel's book *The Cave and the Cathedral*, the Leroi-Gourhan

Theory convincingly argues that the decorated cave possessed a “coherent, uniform structure that [did] not vary across the broad European landscape ... or across the vast span of [20,000 years].”<sup>33</sup> That structure was based on observations of oppositional cosmic energies as embodied in the bison (female) and the horse (male). Furthermore, André Leroi-Gourhan's four-decades-old theory, long neglected but now revived, acknowledges the total cohesiveness of all images within any one cave in which images of the bison and the horse were almost always paired and were generally more numerous than any other species depicted therein.

Leroi-Gourhan's theory has the ability to engage students because, without being entirely dismissive of any ritualistic nature involving just one cave painting, it posits a sophisticated artistic sensibility quite at odds with modern conceptions of art as individual works. In Leroi-Gourhan's mind, an individual cave painting acquired its ultimate validity only as part of the total assemblage of all other paintings in the cave – a situation more akin to the entirety of the sculptural program of Chartres cathedral than to the Solomon Guggenheim collection of modern art. The formulation of the Leroi-Gourhan Theory by itself is an analog for the text-and-countertext proposition. The appreciation of any one astounding image is rendered more complete by the fresh recognition that it exists within a larger tide of images that intrinsically talk to each other. Before Leroi-Gourhan, it was inconceivable to look for those complementary countertexts because, Aczel argues, the modern artistic mindset functions so cognitively unlike that of the supposedly baser instincts of prehistoric humankind.

### **History Refuses to be Contained**

Although humans make history, they do so under conditions rooted in nature's geographical and ecological variability over time. Anthropologist Brian Fagan deliberately avoids endorsing environmental determinism as a primary mechanism of historical change. However, he does maintain that we “delude ourselves if we do not assume” that climatic oscillations, like war or disease, are “among the most important” catalysts of cultural change.<sup>34</sup> He counters his own early exposition on the “Little Ice Age” (1300-1850) with his subsequent text on the “Medieval Great Warming” (800-1300).<sup>35</sup> Thus, in two mutually validating texts, he addresses changes in culture worldwide cumulatively over a period of approximately 1000 years.

Naturally, his work impinges upon scholarship in the history of the built environment – whether it be Benedictine monasteries, the Eddystone Lighthouse, Chaco pueblos, or the Erie Canal. His work can better inform our understanding of the history of architecture – and art.<sup>36</sup>

Every dedicated scholar, writes historian Robert Darnton, understands the frustration associated with the inability to convey to others the true “bottomlessness” of archived knowledge and the “fathomlessness” of the past.<sup>37</sup> Historiography “refuses to be contained within the confines of a single discipline.”<sup>38</sup> In charting new routes for architectural history, the best of its critical thinkers will find “themselves crossing paths in a no-man’s land located at the intersection of [dozens of] fields of study.”<sup>39</sup> The interdisciplinary use of countertexts can suddenly plopp familiar phenomena into unfamiliar waters. The resultant, ever-outward expanding ripples eventually envelop the world. It becomes a phenomenon so sweeping in scope that, as Darnton says, it can “defy conclusive [canonical] interpretations ... .”<sup>40</sup>

Then again, Darnton also admonishes us about “interdisciplinarity run riot.”<sup>41</sup> Historians in architecture programs need to assume the role once held by the “barbarians at the gate” – neither wholly the belligerent outsiders nor entirely the assimilated hordes. They, more than any others, can transit with relative ease from one side of the imperial wall to the other. Rather than drop anchor in the familiar calm harbors of home, they can become mariners aboard well-trimmed ships on an odyssey, sailing out onto the rolling seas of cultural literacy, tacking back and forth across that bar that has for too long separated their scholarly passions and didactic objectives too sharply from the rest of the interdisciplinary, liberalizing, and “international republic of letters.”<sup>42</sup>

*He went like one that hath been stunned,  
And is of sense forlorn;  
A sadder and a wiser man,  
He rose the morrow morn.*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge  
*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*<sup>43</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” *Adventures in English Literature*, eds. J. B.

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Priestley and Josephine Spear (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963) 401 [lines 119-122].

<sup>2</sup> Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, *Timbuktu: The Sahara’s Fabled City of Gold* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2007) 9, 63.

<sup>3</sup> It has been the standard schema in history courses to relegate non-Western styles to secondary or trivialized roles, if they are espied at all. As a corollary, rare has been the general architectural history textbook that does *not* follow the distorted convention of coalescing thousands of years of all non-Western architecture into a single chapter, dropped somewhere between chapters on the Byzantine and Medieval styles, instead of dispersing its contents throughout the sweep of the annals of history. Architectural history is ossifying from within.

<sup>4</sup> de Villiers and Hirtle (242) write that it was, ironically, a Genoese, a Venetian, and finally a Florentine merchant – Benedetto Dei – who were among the first four Europeans to try, in the Quattrocento, to reach Timbuktu. Of the three, Dei is commonly held to have been the first to make it all the way to Timbuktu and back in 1469.

<sup>5</sup> In 1492, the Songhai Empire, centered at the bend of the Niger river in western Africa, was ruled by Sonni Ali Ber, whose repressive policies were most directly felt by the scholars in Timbuktu. The tyrannical ruler boasted a fleet of 400 war barges. Yet, astonishingly, on November 6, 1492, he died accidentally by drowning in a flash flood while encamped in a desert wadi (de Villiers and Hirtle 108). That very same day, Columbus was exploring the northeast coast of Cuba near the mouth of the Rio de Mares; see Zvi Dorn, *Columbus and the Age of Discovery* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991) 165. In 1493, the usurper Askia Mohamed I seized the Songhai throne and, to legitimize his power, allied himself with the scholars of Timbuktu, thus ushering in the second and greatest golden age in the city’s history that coincided with the High Renaissance in Italy (de Villiers and Hirtle 109).

<sup>6</sup> Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007) 189.

<sup>7</sup> Parenthetically, if it seems as though I have permitted (albeit subliminally at first) the metaphor of “water” to permeate this essay so insistently, perhaps it is because I live at the bottom of an ocean – or, more accurately, what was once an ocean over 65 million years ago. Lying near the geodetic center of a great land mass, largely treeless, and virtually semi-arid in the last weeks of summer, the Flint Hills of Kansas convey such an incontrovertible image of “earth” that it strains credibility when encountering indisputable evidence to the contrary. Kansas was once inundated by a great inland sea. Nonetheless, to accede to the essential truth of alternative propositions is to challenge one’s own deeply embedded and presumptive perceptions of the world. The reconciliation of these two equally valid viewpoints offers a more complete conceptualization which, in this case, means that I can never again roll through the undulating

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terrain of the Flint Hills without simultaneously envisioning the floor of that prehistoric ocean. It is natural, then, that allusions to water should resonate so deeply within me. See the work of Michael J. Everhart, *Oceans of Kansas: A Natural History of the Western Interior Sea* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Shenefelt, "Why Study the Greeks? Check the Map," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (7 March 2003) B11.

<sup>9</sup> Shenefelt.

<sup>10</sup> Shenefelt.

<sup>11</sup> John R. Hale, *Lords of the Sea: The Epic Story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009) xxx.

<sup>12</sup> Hale xxx. It is not only the Parthenon, of all things quintessentially Greek, that takes second place to the sea in Hale's nautical history; the legendary prowess of Greece's hoplite (citizen-soldier) land forces is also downplayed in contrast to Hale's emphasis on naval campaigns. For instance, when first beheld by Hale, the epic Battle of Thermopylae (480 BCE), so utterly synonymous with courage against overwhelming odds, is seen but distantly, as if from sea through a spyglass. His countertext concentrates, instead, on the sometimes neglected naval battle at Artemisium that raged on simultaneously with the defeat of the 300 Spartans at the "gate of hot [water] springs." Rather than recount the land battle from a vantage point *in situ*, Hale presents it as a second-hand narrative reported to a squadron of Greek ships, or triremes.

<sup>13</sup> Yet another book that looks at a great (long-presumed exclusively) landed civilization through the countertextual prism of its singular nautical accomplishments is: Louise Levathes, *When China Ruled the Seas: The Treasure Fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Largely neglected in standard histories, the odyssey of China's treasure ships presents at least three surprising countertexts about the inscrutable Ming dynasty. First, the stereotypically isolationist Chinese were, at least briefly, a sublimely impressive naval power that plied the waters out over nearly half the world. Second, not only did these inconceivably gigantic Oriental junks dwarf anything in Columbus's modest Western exploratory fleet (400 feet in length *versus* 85 feet respectively) but they antedated Columbus's voyages by nearly one hundred years. Third, these early 15th-century titanic Chinese treasure ships were such marvels of wooden structural engineering that they more than equaled Brunelleschi's structural acumen in building the masonry dome of Florence's cathedral. Thus, like the discussions about Timbuktu earlier in this essay (see footnotes 4 and 5 above), revelations about the Ming dynasty challenge the canon of a hegemonic, Western-only "renaissance."

<sup>14</sup> John Julius Norwich, *The Middle Sea: A History of the Mediterranean* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) 1.

<sup>15</sup> One recent architectural counterpart to Norwich's general history of the Mediterranean is a series of essays

edited by Jean-Francois Lejeune and Michelangelo Sabatino, *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: Vernacular Dialogues and Contested Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2010). Its contributors propose an alternative history of modern architecture that takes into account the "waves of Mediterraneanism" that have endlessly "ebbed and flowed" all along shores that are home to both canonical styles possessive of "historical primacy" and other styles informed by the "everyday vernacular[s]." Essay by essay, this volume investigates the tendency of each wave "to wipe away traces of preceding ones" (xv, xviii).

<sup>16</sup> Murphy 12.

<sup>17</sup> In some ways, Murphy's proposition is the rhetorical counterpart to that wonderful panoramic vista in the painting *The Battle of Issus* (1529) by Albrecht Altdorfer in which the heady march of classical Western culture confronts the sobering enormity of countervailing Oriental forces marshaled from around the rest of the world. As we scrutinize the mass of humanity engaged in an intense battle between Alexander the Great and Darius III, king of Persia, we realize that the Mediterranean basin and its European boundaries are barely identifiable, for Altdorfer has chosen to reverse the vantage point from which we might normally expect to witness the *melée*. We are forced to look across the Mediterranean *from* the north *to* the south because, in this instance, "north" uncustomarily coincides with the *bottom* edge of his canvas. If only architectural history courses had the same freedom to roam – even upside down.

<sup>18</sup> Murphy 34, quoting: Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Modern Library, 1932) vol. 2, 438.

<sup>19</sup> Murphy 155.

<sup>20</sup> Let us go further. Suppose that an architectural history class were to reverse the preeminence given to imperial Roman construction in stone and concrete in favor of the alternative "barbarian" tradition of building with heavy wooden timbers. Certainly the longevity of timber building techniques, stretching back over millennia to Neolithic longhouses, positions it to be the one true architectural canon. Roman construction would then become the aberration and no longer the norm – a mere blip of just a few hundred years on a timeline of thousands of years of architectural history.

<sup>21</sup> Shenefelt.

<sup>22</sup> Following Shenefelt's lead, architectural historians need only pay a little more attention to countertextual lists. The very title of Amy Chua's book *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance – and Why They Fall* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) is overtly contrived to function as much as homage as it is countertext to Gibbon's scholarship. Chua's protracted discussion of what is essentially a "list" has one aim: to recast the notion of "empire building." It is not the imposition of brute power upon the unwilling and the indefensible that creates an empire. Empire building is the result of a deliberate (though sometimes implicit) governmental policy to embrace

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multicultural communities so as to derive benefit from a diversity of skills and expertise that, in turn, will then help the empire to grow even more powerful. When tolerance fades, the empire falters and disintegrates. To support her thesis, Chua lists the greatest of these empires – the hyperpowers – that rose and fell directly in relationship to their vacillating acceptance or rejection of cultural tolerance: the Persians, the Romans, the Tang Dynasty Chinese, the Mongols, the 17th-century Dutch, and the British. Chua's work achieves a nice balance between Eurocentric bravura and Oriental discretion while all the time demonstrating that we need to rethink the polemically negative connotations inherent to buzz words such as "imperialists."

<sup>23</sup> Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, *Report of the Task Force on General Education* (February 2007) 3 <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu>>. Accessed 17 September 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Harvard 1.

<sup>25</sup> Harvard 1. Harvard's general education program is cited here because, as with so many other issues in higher education, it is Harvard University that often sets the tone and defines the parameters for pedagogical discourse nationwide. Harvard's 2007 proposal for revising their general education program was their first such revision in about three decades.

<sup>26</sup> North Central Association Higher Learning Commission, "Commission Statement on General Education" (February 2003) <<http://www.ncahlc.org>>. Accessed 15 September 2008. The NCAHLC accredits institutions in 19 states; but, in one way or another, all six regional higher education accrediting agencies attest to the importance of general education and define it as a breadth of knowledge accompanied by critical thinking skills.

<sup>27</sup> National Architectural Accreditation Board, *2009 NAAB Conditions for Accreditation – Final Edition: Comparison to 2004 NAAB Conditions for Accreditation* (4 August 2009) 20. <<http://www.naab.org/documents>>. Accessed 15 October 2009.

<sup>28</sup> John Peradotto, "Interrogating the Canon, Depositing the Tyrannus," *Annals of Scholarship: Art Practices and the Human Sciences in a Global Culture* 10.1 (1993; published 1994) 85-109. Peradotto quotes an earlier essay by Wayne Booth, "Is There Any Knowledge That a Man Must Have?" *The Knowledge Most Worth Having*, ed. Wayne Booth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 1-28.

<sup>29</sup> David J. Clines, "Methods in Old Testament Study," *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays, 1967-1998, Volume 1* (JSOTSup, 292; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 23-45 <<http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Postmodern1/Methods.html>>. Accessed 29 January 2009.

<sup>30</sup> Clines.

<sup>31</sup> William Shakespeare, "Macbeth," *Adventures in English Literature*, eds. J. B. Priestley and Josephine Spear

(New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963) 147 [Act II, Scene II, lines 61-64].

<sup>32</sup> Robert McCrum, *Globish: How the English Language Became the World's Language* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010) 86.

<sup>33</sup> Amir D. Aczel, *The Cave and the Cathedral: How a Real-Life Indiana Jones and a Renegade Scholar Decoded the Ancient Art of Man* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009) 184.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Fagan, *The Little Ice Age: How Climate Made History, 1300-1850* (New York: Basic Books Perseus Books Group, 2000) 103.

<sup>35</sup> Fagan, *Little Ice Age*; Brian Fagan, *The Great Warming: Climate Change and the Rise and Fall of Civilizations* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> It seems that Fagan, an amateur art historian, can no longer look at paintings without considering climate. Beyond each painting's central theme, there are esoteric clues that appear to corroborate his scientific hypotheses about the impact of climate on the arts – household arts and ladies' fashions (as portrayed in painted scenes of interiors) and the kaleidoscope of changing cloud patterns (in the painted skies of landscapes) spanning half a millennium. Fagan, *Little Ice Age* 201. Fagan's perspective on art was informed by Hans Neuberger, "Climate in Art," *Weather* 25.2 (1970) 46-56. Neuberger was a meteorologist who studied the depictions of clouds in 6,500 paintings completed between 1400 and 1967. His analysis demonstrated a sharp increase in cloud cover from 1550 to 1850 which may have been a reflection of the actual prolonged climatic oscillation that Fagan has dubbed the "Little Ice Age" rather than a response to shifting artistic fashion.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present and Future* (New York: PublicAffairs Perseus Books Group, 2009) 75.

<sup>38</sup> Darnton 206.

<sup>39</sup> Darnton 176.

<sup>40</sup> Darnton 86.

<sup>41</sup> Darnton 178-179.

<sup>42</sup> Darnton 205.

<sup>43</sup> Coleridge, *Adventures* 414 [lines 622-625].